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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MADRID 000785

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/FO AND EUR/WE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SP](#)

SUBJECT: SPAIN/PARTIDO POPULAR: RAJOY SIDELINES THE OLD
GUARD IN EFFORT TO IMPROVE ELECTORAL CHANCES

REF: A. MADRID 691

[1](#)B. MADRID 537

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Classified By: Ambassador Eduardo Aguirre, Jr. for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (U) During a time when the focus of much of Spain has been both on depressing news that the Spanish economy continues to sour, as well as more upbeat events such the national soccer team's triumph at the European Cup and Mallorcan Rafael Nadal's victory at Wimbledon, leader of the opposition Partido Popular Mariano Rajoy has been remaking the image of his party in an apparent attempt to improve his electoral chances. As detailed in reftels, Rajoy's second straight national election defeat at the hands of President Zapatero led many to believe that his time as party leader had come to an end. In the days and weeks following the March 9 vote Rajoy faced a surge of discontent in party ranks, and there was open discussion of challenges to his leadership. In the end, all potential challengers faded back into the woodwork and Rajoy seems, for now, to be firmly in charge. He has revamped both his Congressional leadership team as well as his party's executive council, putting a younger and more gender-diverse face on the party and eschewing much of the hard political rhetoric that had been the norm during the past four years of opposition. Of all the changes underway in the party, perhaps the most significant has been the move away from the influence of former President Jose Maria Aznar and the sidelining of the old guard that used to call the shots.

[1](#)2. (U) Just days after losing to Zapatero, Rajoy eased out PP Congressional spokesman Eduardo Zaplana and shortly thereafter party Secretary General Angel Acebes announced that he would be stepping down. Spanish pundits and political leaders called these men the first casualties of the PP's electoral defeat and warned that there would be more. Zaplana and Acebes were considered members of the PP old guard, closely linked both to the Aznar administration and the controversial handling of the aftermath and investigation of the 2004 Madrid train bombings. At the 20-22 June Partido Popular conference in Valencia, Rajoy said that it was time for the main opposition party to make a "turn to the center," in an effort to become the party "for all Spaniards." Under this new strategy, the PP would focus all of its attacks on what it says has been the Zapatero government's incompetence at managing Spain's blooming economic crisis. A significant and influential section of the party's right wing has complained about Rajoy's new tack, but these party members have thus far been unable to do anything about it. Some officials like Zaplana and Acebes were forced out, but others like popular leader of the Basque Country PP Maria San Gil resigned because they no longer had confidence in Rajoy or his leadership team.

13. (SBU) Relations between Rajoy and President Aznar (who hand-picked the former to replace him when he stepped down in 2004) have been strained for some time. Rajoy has arranged for an increasingly less prominent role for Aznar at official party gatherings, and the former President has stated publicly that "we will not win if we think we can ignore those who already vote for us." Rajoy gave a recent radio interview in which he said, "We are in a new situation in which Aznar is no longer in politics and Spain has changed, and thus the PP has to deal with new problems that are not the same as when we were last in power." Aznar responded a short time later with an interview of his own, saying that "to reform a party is to add to it, not eliminate it." Rajoy has publicly defended his changes for the good of the party, saying that they have been made based on the PP's "founding principles and values," but Aznar does not appear convinced. The two men met July 13 (their first public appearance together in more than a month) on the margins of a public event put on by Aznar's think tank, the Foundation for Analysis and Social Studies (Spanish acronym FAES). The two made an attempt to show a united front, even joking out loud that they had better greet each other "effusively" or else the press would keep speculating, but it is clear that Rajoy's leadership changes and public comments on the need to go in a new direction have ruffled Aznar and his associates. President Aznar met with the DCM on July 10 during a visit to the Embassy to renew his visa, but said he did not want to talk about the internal changes ongoing within the party.

//COMMENT//

14. (C) It is too early to tell whether Rajoy's efforts to change the face of the Partido Popular will gain any traction among Spanish voters. Rajoy has recently narrowed the gap

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with Zapatero in the polls (one reputable set of numbers showed for the first time ever a slight advantage for Rajoy in terms of popularity), but we chalk this up as much to the worsening economy and the Zapatero government's ineffective handling of it than to any real change in voter affinity. What is clear however is that Rajoy believes he lost the March 2008 election because his party was still viewed as too closely linked to the unpopular past policies of Aznar and that he now needs to institute a radical change to improve his future electoral chances. Although his reforms have caused understandable consternation among those in Aznar's circle, it is not clear there is much they can do about it at this point. The old guard from the party's right wing is likely hoping for poor PP showings in upcoming elections in the Basque Country (Spring 2009), Galicia (June 2009) and in the European Parliament (June 2009) to make their case that Rajoy is no longer fit to lead the party and to wrest control back. That may eventually come to pass, but for now neither Aznar nor his former government advisors working at FAES or elsewhere appear to have any influence over Rajoy or the current party leadership. As internal party politics play out over the coming months, we will continue to work closely with Rajoy and his new team to ensure that we always have friends in the Partido Popular. Likewise, we will attempt to remain in contact with Aznar and his inner circle.

Aguirre